



Navigating the 3 Potholes of Stress Reduction

So you're moving along, reducing stress in your life like a pro, racking up bonus points for your reserve of stress-lowering skills. Then you hit a pothole - what do you do? Charge ahead without thinking? No! Without a little work, your gut feelings may send you cartwheeling down the track, tires flying in all directions, skidding across the pavement. Sure you'll be fine - as soon as you climb out of the twisted mess and remove your helmet... saying 'Gosh, I *knew* better than to do that.'

Successfully reducing stress and maintaining balance in your life call for constant attention and practice. We've all had a lifetime to create stress; it was pretty easy, and well intentioned. It makes sense that undoing this would take some effort.

As you make your way toward decreasing stress and gaining balance for good, here are some "potholes" to look out for: guilt, unfamiliarity, and losing your focus.

✓ *Guilt.* In a time when we try to be everything to everybody, use labels like Super Mom/Super Dad, and take pride in who can work the longest and sleep the least, the idea of sitting by a pond tossing pebbles in the water seems downright sinful. It's easy to feel guilty just relaxing there - especially when you see work crews removing pond scum and dredging the bottom for pebbles. There are some legitimate

things in life to feel guilty about - but taking time for yourself isn't one of them. You've worked hard to meet your obligations; you need and deserve this time.

✓ *Unfamiliarity.* Trying new activities to lower your stress and gain serenity can seem pretty strange at first. So much of our anxiety comes from responding and reacting to the world around us, as it directs our

thoughts and actions. Those feelings you may experience as you take control are your own unfiltered, original observations. They may lead to new ideas and goals, maybe even discoveries about yourself. Be patient; eventually this will be normal to you.

- ✓ *Losing your focus.* Once you begin to enjoy your new-found alertness and energy, tied to calmer thoughts and actions, you might assume more obligations. And why not - your life is pretty sane again. Be careful. It's easy to drift back into old habits - especially when you have all this "extra" time. Remember why you wanted to change in the first place.

You can take intelligent steps to navigate these potholes:

- ✓ *Write a personal contract.* Promise yourself to meet certain goals by listing the specific actions you'll take to reduce stress - today and every day. As with any contract, you may want a supportive witness to sign it, too. Refer to your contract often as a reminder.

- ✓ *Reward yourself.* As you meet your goals, plan healthy rewards - a new CD, walking shoes, low-fat cookbook, or massage. It's your treat; you decide. Do this regularly to acknowledge your progress.
- ✓ *Visualize.* Take time each day to close your eyes and see your life in balance. It's a good way to confirm where you want to be - what life is like when you stick to your objective.



- ✓ *Set new goals.* To keep your commitment fresh, set your sights on something new. Let your goals build on each other to maintain balance, and control stress while expanding into different interests.
- ✓ *Help someone else.* You can help others while helping yourself - the old expression of "leading by example" is very fitting here: If you start to slip, it will be obvious to both of you. And it feels good to share what you've learned with someone you care about.

With diligence and the right mindset, you can sustain balance and keep stress in check. The payoff will be evident physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially.

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